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Students in Urban Settings

Achieving the Baccalaureate Degree

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The public policy which undergirds American higher education is directed toward the ideal of equality and equity of educational opportunity. An array of institutions having significantly different missions and program emphases have been established in response to that public policy. An implicit assumption is that students who begin in an open access institution will, if successful, be able to move to other institutions providing different and more advanced opportunities. Many studies of efforts to achieve articulation between quite different institutions have been carried out over the years but inadequate attention has been given to urban areas where the greatest challenge to the goal of equality of opportunity exists. Simply stated, more poor people, more minorities, and more immigrants live in cities where the college age population is still less than half as likely to enroll in college as their suburban counterparts.

How is America's Population Changing?

The demographic profile of American children now entering public schools makes it clear the problems for urban colleges and universities will grow in magnitude in the years ahead. An illuminating study by Feistritzer (1985) documents the shift in the ethnic composition of Americans caused by a drop in the birthrate among whites over the last two decades while birthrates among minorities remained the same or increased. The white percentage of total population dropped from 87.4% in 1970 to 83.2% in 1980. Blacks now represent 12% of the total population and will increase their percentage in the years ahead. The fastest growing minority, however, are persons of Hispanic origin. The trend is of special significance for the urban city where 54.2% of all black children in this nation live and where the Hispanic minorities also are disproportionately located.

There is a correlation between income and education achievement. Low income students do not achieve as well, persist as long, or complete programs of study in the same proportion as students from middle and upper income groups who typically have had the advantage of greater encouragement and support at home, better schools offering more academic preparation and a cultural expectation of a collegiate education.

How Are Urban Colleges and Universities Responding?

Responsibility for the higher education needs of the inner city population has fallen primarily to the public urban universities and community colleges. Tied organically to their cities, the problems of the urban environment are shared by both types of institution. Both must deal with such conditions as student poverty, high attrition, school system failures, and limited institutional funding. An examination of their working relationships reveals such similar institutional problems as confused missions, overvaluing traditional ways at the expense of local community needs, undervaluing institutional cooperation, and failing to communicate (Cafferty and Spangenberg, 1983).

Urban community colleges do confront enormous problems, and they are the only alternative for most of the students they serve. They have placed considerable emphasis on establishing a supportive environment for minority students, and they have demonstrated a significant advantage in providing underprepared students at the time and support to remedy

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academic deficiencies. The preponderance of evidence suggests students who complete the two-year academic transfer programs at the community college perform reasonably well after they transfer. Yet a critical view of colleges serving minorities in one city grows out of a recent study (Orfield et al. 1984) that found the inner city community colleges more inclined to emphasize remedial and vocational programs while offering only a semblance of transfer education. Furthermore, the actual academic course offerings were found to be narrower and more limited in the city colleges than in their suburban counterparts.

Urban universities (Rudnick, 1983; Smartt, 1981) have diverse missions, purposes, and emphases as well. There is a consistent emphasis on the economic development of the urban area involved as well as a significant commitment to professional and technical programs, as contrasted with undergraduate arts and sciences. They reflect their location by providing programs that serve the basic educational needs of placebound and traditionally underrepresented clienteles but typically see these activities as detrimental to their image as research institutions. While urban community colleges and universities recognize the importance of the transfer student, there has not been a linking of the two institutions to make this process systematic and orderly. In several cities, they compete for the better prepared high school graduates.

How Are They Doing?

Urban minorities in larger numbers turn to the community college as their point of access to higher education. At the same time, they come with severe academic deficiencies, ranging from basic skills to limited or inadequate math and science backgrounds. Their aspirations for baccalaureate degrees are not much different than the aspirations of their counterparts in suburban colleges. Yet because of their educational background, they are more likely to be advised to enter a vocational program rather than a transfer program. Concurrently, the transfer function of many community colleges, including those in urban areas, appear endangered.

Questions of the effectiveness of community college transfer programs as well as attrition patterns for students may need to be reexamined on the basis of a recent longitudinal study of the City University of New York. In that study, open admissions students graduated at a rate of 16% after four years, another 16% after five years, and an additional 11% after eleven years, producing a total graduation rate of 43% (Lavin, Murtha, and Kaufman 1984). Perhaps the most important observation involves the persistence and courage observed among those who managed to balance their problems and challenges of life for as long as 11 years in their quest for a degree. Clearly, research on attrition needs to be redesigned to accommodate longer time frames than those used in the past to assess the performance of traditional, full-time students.

How Can They Improve Practice?

Policies and activities identified that enhance transfer of community college students include: 1) university scholarships for transfer students; 2) reserved dorm space for mid-year transfers; 3) coordination of veterans' benefits; 4) joint faculty events and counseling exchanges; and 5) dual enrollment, where a transfer student is paired with a peer for easier acclimatization at no greater cost than single enrollment (Breyer, 1982). Inevitably, where transfer success occurs, a strong articulation agreement is both present and honored.

Some of the strategies being implemented in urban community colleges include university courses offered on community college campuses, concurrent enrollment at both universities and community colleges, improved orientation programs, peer counselors, mentors, special courses, and outside speakers used as role models to assist students in defining career objectives and in developing educational plans for their achievement (Schaier-Pelleg, 1984).

It will take time to deal with issues related to the quality of urban secondary schools and the socioeconomic status of those who attend them. The existence of problems that lie beyond the immediate influence of community colleges and universities should not, however, be used as a rationale for avoiding institutional action. As in most areas of human endeavor, we know more about improving opportunities for urban minorities than we are currently using. Colleges and universities with a strong commitment to promoting equal educational opportunity have the means at their disposal to improve outcomes over those currently being achieved.

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ABSTRACT

Factors that affect the attainment of a bachelor's degree by urban students are outlined. The demographic profile of American school children makes it clear that problems for urban colleges and universities will grow in the years ahead. There is a correlation between income and education achievement; low income students do not achieve, persist, or complete programs of study in the same proportion as middle or upper income students. The public urban universities and community colleges must deal with the situation and have placed considerable emphasis on establishing a supportive environment for minority students and on providing academic support to underprepared students. Policies and activities that can enhance transfer of community college students into upper division programs include: (1) university scholarships for transfer students; (2) reserved dormitory space for mid-year transfers; (3) coordination of veterans' benefits; (4) joint faculty events and counseling exchanges; and (5) dual enrollment, where a transfer student is paired with a peer for easier adjustment. (LB)

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